

Refugee Claimants in Waterloo Region: September 2017 Update

Background

According to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), 65.6 million individuals were forcibly displaced worldwide at the end of 2016. Among these, 17.2 million were refugees recognised under the mandate of UNHCR and 2.8 million were asylum seekers. Currently, displacements are affecting many countries in the Middle East, Africa, Asia and Europe.ⁱ

Refugee claimants make their application for asylum at any port of entry or in Canada after they arrive. Waterloo Region has always been a destination community for refugee claimants. The Mennonite Coalition for Refugee Supports and the K-W Multicultural Centre support claimants with their claims process. They and other agencies provide settlement support.

When a claim is made, the Canadian government determines eligibility of the claimant. Those found to be eligible are granted permission to enter or stay in Canada pending decision on their application by the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada.

Since 2016, communities across Canada have experienced a rise in refugee claimant arrivals. Most recently Quebec has experienced an influx, with nearly 12,000 people intercepted at its borders to date in 2017.ⁱⁱ

Between 2011 and 2013, an average of 80 people per year filed their claim for refugee status in Waterloo Region.ⁱⁱⁱ So far in 2017 local settlement providers report 400+ arrivals, a 400% increase in the number of claimants filing applications in Waterloo Region four years ago.

Recently arrived claimants come from at least 33 different countries, including Honduras, Afghanistan, Venezuela, Iraq, El Salvador, Syria, Mexico, Turkey, Peru, Haiti, Eritrea and more. Given global circumstances, these numbers are expected to continue rising. At the same time, government-assisted refugees and privately sponsored refugees continue to arrive on an ongoing basis.

Local Implications

The increase of refugee claimant arrivals in Waterloo Region has service planning and provision implications in the refugee settlement sector and many others.

Information of relevance on refugee claimants in Waterloo Region includes:

- Refugee claimants arrive on an ongoing basis, without notice. They are not financially supported by the Federal Government.
- A significant proportion of recent arrivals are families; historically, arrivals have been a mix of singles and families.

- Once they file their application for asylum and receive their eligibility document (brown paper), claimants are eligible to apply for a work or study permit, go to elementary and secondary school, receive Interim Federal Health Program coverage and access social assistance (Ontario Works, etc.) while they await the decision on whether or not their claim for protected status is accepted.^{iv} Many live in Waterloo Region for between one and three years before this happens.
- Some recent arrivals have travelled from Quebec or other communities. This can delay their access to basic services in Ontario. Solutions are needed in this gap period.
- Claimants are in immediate need of housing; the Federal Government does not provide this. Informal housing networks established in the past are geared towards lower volumes and singles; they do not meet current needs. Adapted and expanded transitional housing networks are needed, as is long-term affordable housing.
- Local emergency shelters are seeing an increase in claimant admittances: 30 in the first eight months of 2017, compared to 17 in previous years.
- Top referrals are to legal services, housing, health and mental health services, income and employment support, food and clothing assistance programs, language training, education and other community services.

The demand for legal support, documents processing, temporary and long-term affordable housing, income and employment support, food and clothing assistance, health and mental health services, education, language assessment and training, subsidized transit and child care, etc. is anticipated to increase. Service partners in these and other areas are encouraged to plan for how their service will support these vulnerable individuals and families now living in Waterloo Region.

Immigration Partnership will:

1. Engage government and funders in discussion to ensure that resources are being channeled where most needed and utilized effectively to meet refugee claimants' needs.
2. Identify gaps and encourage solution oriented planning to meet refugee needs.
3. Build on Immigration Partnership's existing frameworks for service alignment and coordination to facilitate targeted service planning and coordination with services in the areas of most immediate need.
4. Disseminate information to municipalities, and other service groups so that they are informed of developments and can adequately support the welcoming and integration of refugee claimants.

ⁱ UNHCR *Global Trends*, 2016. p.2. Retrieved from: <http://www.unhcr.org/5943e8a34.pdf>.

ⁱⁱ Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, *Asylum Claims and Interceptions*: <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/refugees/asylum-claims-made-in-canada.asp>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, RDM. October, 2014.

^{iv} Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada refugee claim process summary: <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/refugees/asylum/stay.asp>

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